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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RPO DUBAI 000547

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 2034/12/28

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SUBJECT: Iran: Initial Reports Indicate Violent Ashura Clashes

CLASSIFIED BY: Alan Eyre, Director, DOS, IRPO; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

11. (U) SUMMARY: As of December 27, 1800 hours Tehran time, initial indications from Iran indicate that antigovernment demonstrations on the Shiite holiday of Tasua (Saturday, December 26) were minimal, although crowd violence initiated by pro-government/Basij elements forced former President Khatami to prematurely leave a Northern Tehran public speaking engagement. However, on the following day Ashura (Sunday, December 27) Tehran saw its most violent clashes since the start of the post-election protests. Most protests were in central Tehran. Reformist/Oppositionist websites cited three to four casualties, to include Mir Hossein Mousavi's nephew. It is quite possible that more clashes will ensue the night of the 27th, as protesters have vowed to remain/congregate in select Tehran squares and parks (NOTE: Upcoming septel with a more extensive/updated cable on the Ashura protests). END SUMMARY.

TASUA - DEC 26

12. (U) Traditionally in post-revolutionary Iran people stay inside/at home for Tasua (i.e. 9th of Moharram) but go outside for Ashura (10th of Moharram). As such, street turnout in most of Iran on December 26 was minimal, with exceptions mostly in the Najafabad/Esfahan area, due to activities related to the death of Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, who was from Najafabad. Grand Ayatollah Taheri, now the senior-most dissident 'oppositionist' cleric, is also located in Esfahan, and regime security measures around his home in Esfahan have also been pronounced.

KHATAMI ROUTED

13. (U) In Tehran, the main incident occurred in northern Tehran, in the Jamaran Mosque, where former President Khatami was scheduled to give a talk in the Jamaran Mosque (where the late Grand Ayatollah Khomeini used to speak). Pro-government/Basij elements took their places in the mosque before Khatami started his speech a little before 1800 hours. Khomieni's grandson Yasser gave the opening prayer, and then Khatami started speaking, at which point pro-government elements started chanting anti-Khatami slogans.

Pro-Khatami elements w/in the mosque responded, and tensions increased to the point where 15 minutes into the speech, Khatami's bodyguards extracted him. At which point the few thousand of pro-Khatami supporters in the immediate surroundings (who had come but hadn't found space inside the mosque, started chanting oppositionist slogans. After about two hours, i.e. 2000 hours local time, Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) forces moved in and dispersed the crowd w/tear gas and batons. No casualties reported.

ASHURA - DEC 27

14. (C) In Tehran, people were out in force, mostly in central Tehran along the north-south streets on which the major universities are located. Reported clusters of protesters ranged in the several hundred to several thousand range, according to press (NOTE: needless to say, official Iranian media didn't cover these demonstrations w/any accuracy, with most of the more reliable reporting coming from reformist and/or oppositionist websites, and the BBC Persian service). There were many reports of violent clashes between protesters and security forces, and one IRPO contact in touch with people in Central Tehran called today 'the most violent day' since the post-election protests began.

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15. (U) Police used tear gas and batons to break up crowds, and in at least one case at "College Bridge" near Amir Kabir University, fired directly into the crowd, with three to four reported deaths (Note: A relative of Mir Hossein Mousavi was reportedly also shot near Enghelab Square in Central Tehran - see below). According to some reports in at least some cases, most notably Vali Asr Square, protesters were able to drive out security forces from the area.

16. (C) Traditionally during Ashura people stay out at night, lighting candles and marching, and for the night of December 27 protestors have announced they will stay/assemble in Central Tehran squares during evening, 'continuing their struggle.' They have announced congregations at Mohseni, Vanak, Ferdowsi, Imam Hossein, Tajrish, and Arya Shahr Squares, and also Mellat and Laleh Parks. One knowledge IRPO contact predicted another round of violent clashes tonight, as security forces move against protesters in many of these key squares.

OTHER CITIES

17. (U) According to oppositionist websites, following appearance of 'special units' in Esfahan and Najafabad, tens of thousands of mourners of these two cities have started engaged in widespread clashes with military forces. At Enghelab square and Hosseinabad in Esfahan and also Sepah street widespread clashes have been reported. Jaras reporter in Najafabad also reported 'very severe' clashes in Najafabad.

MOUSAVI RELATIVE KILLED

18. (U) According to a reformist website, 35 year old Seyyed Ali Habibi Mousavi Khameneh, a nephew of Mir Hossein Mousavi and father

of two children, was shot in the chest during protests around noon in protests near Engelab Square. He was taken to Ebn Sina hospital, where he died. Reportedly, Mir Hossein Mousavi and other prominent personalities have gone to the hospital. (Note: there are no reports of any of the Green Path Opposition leaders - i.e. Mousavi, Karrubi, Khatami - playing any visible role today.)
EYRE